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ABSTRACT

Sex roles and sex differences in grandparent-grandchild relationships have begun to attract the attention of researchers in the field of extended family relations. Male (N=184) and female (N=221) students of a rural Maine high school responded to a questionnaire designed to examine sex differences in interactions between adolescents and their grandparents. The results showed that female grandchildren were more likely than male grandchildren to have learned a specific skill from grandparents, but there were no significant differences between male and female grandchildren on six other types of interactions: doing work for grandparents, having personal conversations with grandparents, talking about family history, grandparents telling stories about adolescents' parents, grandparents and grandchildren going on trips together, and grandparents giving advice. Female adolescents were no more likely than male adolescents to report being encouraged by parents to visit or talk to grandparents. Adolescents of both sexes reported that the majority of skills learned from grandparents had been taught by a same-sexed grandparent, and sex of grandparents was a stronger predictor of skill transmission than was maternal or paternal lineage. The specific types of skills learned from grandparents were largely in conformity with current sex role stereotypes. Eighteen reference items are listed. (Author/NRB)

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SEX DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENTS' RELATIONS WITH GRANDPARENTS

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ABSTRACT

THIS QUESTIONNAIRE STUDY OF 405 HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTERACTIONS WITH GRANDPARENTS FOUND THAT FEMALE GRANDCHILDREN WERE MORE LIKELY THAN MALE GRANDCHILDREN TO HAVE LEARNED A SPECIFIC SKILL FROM GRANDPARENTS, BUT THERE WERE NO SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE GRANDCHILDREN ON SIX OTHER TYPES OF INTERACTION. CONTRARY TO EXPECTATIONS, FEMALE ADOLESCENTS WERE NO MORE LIKELY THAN MALE ADOLESCENTS TO REPORT BEING ENCOURAGED BY PARENTS TO VISIT OR TALK TO GRANDPARENTS. ADOLESCENTS OF BOTH SEXES REPORTED THAT THE MAJORITY OF SKILLS LEARNED FROM GRANDPARENTS HAD BEEN TAUGHT BY A SAME-SEXED GRANDPARENT, AND SEX OF GRANDPARENTS WAS A STRONGER PEDICTOR OF SKILL TRANSMISSION THAN WAS MATERNAL OR PATERNAL LINEAGE. THE SPECIFIC TYPES OF SKILLS LEARNED FROM GRANDPARENTS WERE LARGELY IN CONFORMITY WITH CURRENT SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES. THE RESULTS ARE DISCUSSED IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRENT MODELS OF EXTENDED-FAMILY RELATIONS.

SEX DIFFERENCES IN ADOLESCENTS' RELATIONS WITH GRANDPARENTS

As noted in several recent reviews and research papers, sex roles and sex differences in grandparent-grandchild relationships have begun to attract the attention of researchers in the field of extended family relations (Hagestad & Speicher, 1981; Thomas & Datan, 1983; Troll, 1983). Early speculation on this subject from the perspective of grandparents suggested that the grandparent role is really an expressive, nurturant, grandmother role (Boyd, 1969; Smith, 1965). Thus if men are to be involved in the lives of grandchildren, it was contended that men must become "maternal" or "feminine" in orientation, at best a difficult task. This view received anecdotal support from one young grandchild who described a grandfather as "a man grandmother" (Huyck, 1974).

Atchley (1980), adding the gender of the grandchild as a variable in the relationship, suggests that the grandmother-granddaughter relationship is likely to be the strongest:

> Grandmothers appear to have a somewhat better chance of developing a relationship with their granddaughters than grandfathers have in developing one with their grandsons...It is simply a matter of the grandmothers' having more to offer their granddaughters that is pertinent to the lives they will lead. Sewing, cooking, and childbearing are but a few of the subjects that granddaughters want to learn about. In contrast, the grandfathers very often find their skills unwanted, not only by industry but by their grandsons as well (p. 353).

It has also been suggested that because women tend to be the "kin keepers" and primary mediators in the family, the strongest bond is likely to develop between a granddaughter and a

maternal grandmother (Troll, 1980).

Empirical studies that have examined these hypotheses from the perspective of grandchildren have generally asked grandchildren to indicate which of their grandparents was their favorite, which they felt closest to, or which they had most contact with. Kahana and Kahana (1970), in a study of children ages four to twelve, found that maternal grandparents were more likely than paternal grandparents to be named as favorites, with a slight preference to the maternal grandmother. Hartshorne and Manaster (1982) likewise found that college students had the most contact with their maternal grandmother, and she was most likely to have the most importance attached to her. Hoffman (1979-80) found college students were significantly closer emotionally to maternal than paternal grandparents, with the maternal grandmother closest but not significantly closer than the maternal grandfather. He concluded that maternal or paternal kin position was more important than sex of the grandparent in determining relationship closeness.

A limitation of these studies is that they did not examine sex of the grandchild as a variable. The Kahana and Kahana study did not differentiate by sex of grandchild, the Hartshorne and Manaster sample was two-thirds female but did not differentiate by sex, and the Hoffman sample included females only. Schultz (1980), in a study that compared male and female grandchildren ages four to twenty-two, found no overall trend for the grandparent with the most reciprocal role interaction

to be of the same sex as the grandchild. However, all adolescent females chose a grandmother, while for adolescent males there was no trend toward choosing either a grandmother or grandfather. In contrast, Matthews' (1983) study of college students found that grandchildren of both sexes felt closest to their maternal grandmother.

Overall, then, empirical evidence suggests that grandchildren are most likely to have a close relationship with a maternal grandparent, with the relationship with the maternal grandmother often described as closest. However, the results are not particularly instructive or in agreement with regard to how the sex of the grandchild influences the relationship. A further problem, as Hagestad (in press) suggests, is that we may be imposing "female measures" on men's relationships. In other words, when we ask about "closeness", we may be judging the importance of grandparent-grandchild ties in primarily expressive terms--the traditional female domain--while omitting issues of more instrumental importance. Therefore, the present study was designed, in part, to examine sex differences in what adolescents did with their grandparents, did for their grandparents, and learned from their grandparents. Specific purposes of the research were to determine:

1. Sex differences in the types of interaction adolescent grandchildren engaged in with their grandparents;

2. What skills, if any, adolescents learned from grandparents, and possible sex differences in types of skills learned;

3. Types of work and assistance provided by adolescent grandchildren to grandparents during the previous year, and possible sex differences in such support;

4. Which grandparent, by sex and kin position, male and female adolescents most preferred to spend time with;

5. Whether male and female adolescents differed in frequency of face-to-face and telephone contact with grandparents.

METHOD

Participants in the study were 405 students (221 female, 184 male) representing 79 percent of the student population of a rural Maine high school. A requirement for participation was that the student have at least one living grandparent, and eight percent of the students did not meet this requirement. Other reasons for non-participation were absence from school (5%), participation in other school activities (4%), and lack of student or parent consent (4%). The age range of respondents was 14 to 19 years, with a mean of 16.9. Ninety-seven percent of the sample was Caucasian, and religious affiliation was primarily Catholic (53%) and Protestant (36%). The sample was described by the school principal as predominantly rural and lower-middle class, with most of the respondents' parents engaged in paper industry jobs, farm employment, or rural service occupations.

The questionnaire used in the study consisted of the following:

1. Seven questions (answered "yes" or "no") about types of interaction with grandparents the respondents had engaged in during their lifetime (see Table 1). These items were developed for an earlier study (Baranowski, 1982) based on information collected in interviews with 32 adolescents.

2. A question asking whether the respondent was encouraged by parents to visit or talk to grandparents (see Table 1);

3. An item asking the respondents to list skills, sports, or hobbies, if any, they had learned from grandparents, and to indicate from which grandparent they had learned them;

4. An item about the types of work or assistance, if any, provided by the respondent to a grandparent in the last year;

5. An item asking the respondent to indicate which of their grandparents they most liked to spend time with;

6. A measure of frequency of telephone and face-to-face contact with each grandparent during the last year.

All questionnaires were completed in a classroom setting with a teacher present.

RESULTS

As shown in Table 1, female adolescents were significantly more likely than male adolescents to have learned a hobby, sport, or skill from a grandparent (chi-square=5.81, df=1, $p<.05$). There were no significant sex differences on six other types of interaction with grandparents, although a slightly larger percentage of females than males engaged in each type of interaction except being told about family history. The question on parental mediation--"Do your parents

encourage you to visit or talk to your grandparents?"--did not show a significant sex difference.

Insert Table 1 about here

Both female and male grandchildren were more likely to have learned a skill, sport, or hobby from a grandparent of the same sex than from a grandparent of the opposite sex (see Table 2). This was true for each of the three categories of activity. A higher percentage of females learned each type of activity from a maternal grandmother than from a paternal grandmother. Among males, however, there were no clear-cut differences between maternal and paternal grandfathers.

Insert Table 2 about here

The specific skills, sports, and hobbies learned from grandparents were largely in conformity to sex-role norms. Sports, automobile repair, and various types of farm and forest work were the types of activity most often listed by male grandchildren, and these were usually learned from a grandfather. Sewing, knitting, and cooking were the skills most often learned by female grandchildren, usually from a grandmother. There were occasional exceptions, such as one grandson who learned needlepoint, crocheting, and decoupage from his paternal grandmother, and a granddaughter who learned how to "cheat at poker, drink beer, and shoot deer"

from her paternal grandfather!

The types of work adolescent grandchildren had done to assist grandparents during the last year also generally conformed to traditional stereotypes of sex-appropriate behavior (see Table 3). Female grandchildren were more likely than male grandchildren to have been of assistance with housework, e.g., cooking, laundry, and dishwashing. Male grandchildren were more likely to have helped with maintenance of the house and yard, e.g., lawn mowing, house repair, painting, and snow removal.

Insert Table 3 about here

More female grandchildren chose a grandmother (62%) than a grandfather (15%) as the grandparent with whom they most liked to spend time, with the maternal grandmother most favored (37%) (see Table 4). Male grandchildren tended to express a slight preference for the maternal grandmother as compared to other grandparents, but "no preference" was the most frequent response among males.

These results are confounded by the fact that more of these grandchildren had living maternal grandparents (especially maternal grandmothers) than paternal grandparents. Therefore a second analysis was done which included only those grandchildren who had four living grandparents and expressed a preference for one (see Table 5). The results confirm the finding that a grandmother, particularly the maternal grand-

mother, is most often the "favorite" among adolescent girls. Among male grandchildren, however, no particular favorite emerged.

Insert Tables 4 & 5 about here

Finally, there were no significant differences between female and male grandchildren on the measure of frequency of face-to-face contact with each grandparent during the last year. Female adolescents telephoned their maternal grandmother significantly more often than did male adolescents (chi-square=13.68, df=4, $p<.01$), but there were no significant sex differences in telephone contact with the other three grandparents.

DISCUSSION

An examination of the types of grandparent-grandchild interaction experienced by these grandchildren reveals few differences between male and female grandchildren. Even the statistically significant difference by sex in skill learning represents a difference of only twelve percent. It appears that with regard to these facets of interactional behavior, grandsons are not substantially deprived compared to granddaughters. It should be noted, however, that the global nature of these questions--simply asking if a behavior has ever occurred--may mask important sex differences in diversity, richness, continuity, and frequency of interaction.

The findings of the present study support the results of previous research on the function of grandparents as family historians (Baranowski, 1982; Robertson, 1976), especially with regard to the "history" of these adolescents' parents. Mead (1974) suggested that grandparents, for better or worse, give grandchildren information about their parents that the parents are reluctant to disclose, perhaps for fear of tarnishing the halo that supports parental authority. The data indicate that for more than three-quarters of the grandchildren in this study, Mead's speculation may be correct.

Given the plethora of studies reporting closeness between grandchildren and grandparents and Konopka's (1976) description of grandmothers as confidants to adolescent girls, it is somewhat surprising that only about one-third of the granddaughters and one-fourth of the grandsons in the present study had ever had what they considered to be a "really personal conversation" with any grandparent. Perhaps conversational intimacy is not what is expected, sought, or required in grandparent-grandchild relationships. Rather, as Hagestad (in press) suggests, simply "being there"--symbolically or in the flesh--provides the primary meaning of closeness in the relationship.

With regard to skills, sports, and hobbies, it is clear that most of these are transmitted from grandparent to grandchild along same-sex lines. Differences by maternal or paternal position seem to be less important than sex of the grandparent,

especially for boys. The most frequent skill transmission in Table 2 is a practical skill taught by a maternal grandmother to a granddaughter, supporting previous speculation and research on the relative strength of this particular family tie. However, the primacy of the paternal grandfather-grandson relationship noted by Hagestad and Speicher (1981), does not appear here. While as Hagestad found, grandfathers usually confine their influence to grandsons, the grandsons in this study were not more likely to have learned a skill from a paternal as compared to maternal grandfather. Of course, the fact that a greater number of adolescents had a living maternal than paternal grandfather may hide a greater likelihood of paternal lineage influence in this study.

The findings of sex-stereotyped learning from grandparents as well as assistance to grandparents mirror in a striking way the "home economics versus shop" distinction common in the history of American families and schools. Thomas and Datan (1983) found that most grandparents gave gifts and engaged in games with grandchildren that encouraged conformity to sex-role norms, and the findings of the present study extend this dichotomy of sex appropriateness to grandparent-to-grandchild skill teaching and grandchild-to-grandparent assistance. The era of the liberated woman, "new man", and androgynous child do not appear to have impacted heavily on the facets of grandparent-grandchild interaction measured in this study.

Finally, it is worth noting that this was a white, rural,

lower-middle class, northern New England sample characterized by fairly low social and geographic mobility. The content of learned skills, patterns of kinship interaction, and sex-role distinctions found in this research no doubt reflect in part these sample characteristics. A comparison of these extended families to those in midwestern cities or sunbelt suburbs would provide interesting grounds for future analysis.

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Table 1. Frequency of Adolescent "Yes" Responses to Grandparent-Grandchild Interaction Questions, by Sex of Adolescent

Interaction Question	Female (N=221) Freq.	%	Male (N=184) Freq.	%	Chi-Square	p
1. Have you ever learned a skill, hobby, or sport from any of your grandparents?	146	66%	99	54%	5.81	<.05
2. Have you ever done any work for or with any of your grandparents?	116	53%	94	51%	0.03	ns
3. Have you ever had a really personal conversation with any of your grandparents?	82	37%	52	28%	3.16	ns
4. Have any of your grandparents ever talked to you about your family's history?	162	73%	135	73%	0.00	ns
5. Have your grandparents told you stories about what your parents were like when they were younger?	184	83%	143	78%	1.64	ns
6. Have you ever taken a trip or vacation with any of your grandparents when your parents weren't along?	79	36%	56	30%	1.05	ns
7. Have your grandparents ever given you advice or tried to influence your opinion in any way?	118	53%	81	44%	3.16	ns
8. Do your parents encourage you to visit or talk to your grandparents?	156	71%	114	62%	2.99	ns

Table 2. Percentage of Adolescents Who Learned a Skill, Sport, or Hobby from Grandparents, by Sex of Adolescent and Kin Position of Grandparent

What was Learned	Female				Male			
	Mater. Grand-mother	Mater. Grand-father	Pater. Grand-mother	Pater. Grand-father	Mater. Grand-mother	Mater. Grand-father	Pater. Grand-mother	Pater. Grand-father
Practical Skill	28%	7%	16%	5%	5%	16%	4%	17%
Sport	5%	0%	3%	1%	4%	14%	2%	13%
Hobby or Game	10%	1%	3%	1%	1%	3%	1%	2%

Table 3. Types of Work Done by Adolescents for Grandparents During the Last Year, by Sex of Adolescent

Type of Work/Assistance	Female (N=221) N	%	Male (N=184) N	%
HOUSEWORK (e.g., cleaning, cooking, washing dishes, etc.)	89	40%	16	9%
HOUSE & YARD MAINTENANCE (e.g., repair, painting, raking leaves, mowing lawn, etc.)	59	27%	80	43%
TRANSPORTATION & ERRANDS	12	5%	21	11%
OTHER	8	4%	6	3%

Table 4. Grandparent Adolescent "Most Likes to Spend Time With" by Sex of Adolescent

"Preferred" Grandparent	Female N	Female %	Male N	Male %
Maternal Grandmother	81	37%	40	22%
Maternal Grandfather	14	6%	28	15%
Paternal Grandmother	55	25%	25	14%
Paternal Grandfather	19	9%	28	15%
No Preference	52	23%	63	34%

Chi-square=29.45, df=4, p<.001

Table 5. Grandparent Adolescent "Most Likes to Spend Time With" among Respondents with a Distinct Preference and Four Living Grandparents

"Preferred" Grandparent	Female N	Female %	Male N	Male %
Maternal Grandmother	24	48%	8	28%
Maternal Grandfather	3	6%	8	28%
Paternal Grandmother	17	34%	5	17%
Paternal Grandfather	6	12%	8	28%

Chi-square=12.40, df=3, p<.01